

A Martyr's Faith  
Acts 7:55-60  
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No church is perfect. No matter how peaceful and harmonious a church may seem, every congregation has its flaws. I served a church in seminary that was known for its amazing architecture, but was falling apart at the seams spiritually because of the behavior of a few church members. Even this church went through an incredibly tumultuous time back in the 1990s.

But I'm going to guess that no one was murdered in the process, even though there may have been very qualified candidates. I know of a lot of churches that have gone through nasty conflicts and divisive battles. I've even heard of churches excommunicating people. But I've yet to hear of a church that settles its dispute by killing the catalyst.

Last week we looked at the portrait of the early church in Acts 2. It was all peace and love and rainbows as the church shared everything together and ate meals with glad and sincere hearts. I'm sure "Kum Bah Yah" was playing on the radio while they ate. And yet, only five chapters later, we have the story of Stephen, who was stoned to death by the church board for saying what he believed.

Stephen is an interesting story. We first hear about him in Acts 6, when the apostles were becoming overloaded with work and beginning to ignore their duty of caring for the widows. So the apostles appoint seven people to take over that responsibility, and one of those is Stephen, who was said to be "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit."

Stephen takes on this responsibility and does it with great fervor. In fact, it is from him that we get the name for our Stephen Ministry program, which provides care for people going through difficult times. Acts 6 says that Stephen "did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people." But not everyone was happy. Some of the synagogue leaders began to argue with him, and when they realized they couldn't outwit him or change his mind, they simply lied about him, accusing him of blasphemy against God. The penalty for blasphemy was death.

Stephen is put on trial by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious ruling council, and he gives an impassioned speech in chapter 7 about how followers of God have a history of disobedience, and the followers in front of him were no different. Stephen had to know he was speaking his own death sentence. You don't look your judge in the eye and tell him all the things he's doing wrong.

Here's how Stephen concludes his speech. Imagine listening to this as one of those who was deciding Stephen's fate. Imagine Stephen is speaking about you: "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." Stephen was an excellent administrator and a man of great faith, but he could definitely use some work on his diplomacy skills.

So the result is what you would expect, and it's what we pick up in today's passage. Verse 54 says, "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him." The originally Hebrew literally translates to say, "Their hearts were ripped open." This lynch mob takes Stephen outside the city and stones him to death.

What did Stephen do wrong here? What did he do to deserve this fate? He enthusiastically helped widows. He was a man who lived out his faith with zeal. He was accused of blasphemy, but that was the only way his enemies could get him arrested. So what did he do wrong?

You may not know the name Jeffrey Wigand, but you might know his story. Wigand was vice-president of research and development for Brown and Williamson in Louisville, Ky., where he was working on the development of safer cigarettes. When he realized that the company was covering up important information about the addictiveness of cigarettes, he spoke up and became one of the most famous whistle-blowers in our country's history. They even made a movie about him called "The Insider."

What did Wigand get for his noble efforts? Well, he got fired, of course. His wife divorced him and moved his two daughters to another state. He had a lawsuit filed against him. He had to hire two ex-Secret Service agents as bodyguards. He found a bullet in his mailbox. He had a 500-page smear campaign launched against him by Brown and Williamson. He wasn't stoned to death, but I would have to imagine at times it felt that way.

What did Jeffrey Wigand and Stephen both do wrong? They told the truth. They looked at what was going on around them and dared to name it. They put their jobs, reputations, and lives on the line for the sake of telling the truth. Regardless of the consequences, they put more value on the truth than on themselves.

It's a novel concept in these days of scripted reality TV shows and fictionalized memoirs and political campaigns. Pilate's question to Jesus – "What is truth?" – rings in our ears today. In fact, the idea of telling the truth has become almost humorous. Comedian Stephen Colbert, host of Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*, has added a new term to our culture's lexicon -- "truthiness." Colbert defines "truthiness" as "a devotion to information that he wishes were true even if it's not." Colbert says with a straight face: "I'm not a fan of facts. You see, facts can change, but my opinion will never change, no matter what the facts are."

Both Jeffrey Wigand and Stephen found out the dangers of speaking the facts. If you were put in a similar situation as either of these men, what would you do? It's easy for us to take the noble high road on a Sunday morning, but if we were confronted with similar situations, would we be bold enough to tell the truth, or would we resort to "truthiness"?

I think another way to ask that question is, "What is worth living for and what is worth dying for?" Now, let's be honest. I doubt that you or I will be put in a situation where we have to make the choice that Stephen did. He knew that if he remained faithful and told the truth in the face of opposition, it would not only make him extremely unpopular, it would make him dead.

Even if telling the truth wouldn't end our lives, it could end other things: important relationships, our acceptance within certain circles, our standing or regard in the community. If a relative engages in behavior we consider un-Christian, or a friend

tells an offensive joke, do we speak up and call it like we see it, or is it better to stay quiet, to let it pass, to assume that someone else will say something?

I think most times, I would stay quiet. It's easier, isn't it? Who am I to pass judgment? Let God sort them out. Sometimes I'm a better diplomat than a truth-teller. But if I profess to believe in Jesus Christ, who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and if I am trying to live a life worthy of him, what role does truth play? Does the truth take priority at all times, or only when telling it won't get me in trouble?

It's hard to speak the truth, even in love. But there are situations in our lives that cry out for the truth to be spoken, and maybe God has called us to be the truth speaker in that situation. Does it take courage? You bet. Could there be consequences? Of course. But we are followers of the Truth. Paul says in 2 Corinthians, "We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth."

Ah yes, Paul. The other actor in Stephen's drama. Of course, he was known as Saul then. As a leader in the synagogue, Paul gave tacit approval for Stephen's murder. And yet, that experience had a profound influence on Paul. After he is converted, Paul references Stephen's death when talking about how God took the person Paul was and transformed him to the person he became, the greatest evangelist who ever lived.

Here's what that tells me: You never know who's watching you. You never know who's going to overhear you telling the truth, taking a stand for your faith regardless of the consequences. We are called to live as Christians first, and that means being willing to let our faith guide and direct our actions, even when it has consequences. There's the popular thing to do, the safe thing to do – then there's the right thing to do.

After all, Jesus didn't say, "I came into this world to testify to truthiness." He said, "I came into this world to testify to the truth." May the lives we live and the choices we make give the same testimony.